Help Desk*

by Kevin Savetz

Q I am a new user to the Internet. I found a newsgroup called **rec.music.marketplace**. I noticed that other people are listing personal items for sale, as well as commercial advertisements. I have a product that I would like to offer online. Can I announce my product, or should I play it safe and keep quiet? I don't want to violate my service provider's Terms of Agreement.

A The answer depends entirely on the newsgroup to which you wish to post and your terms of agreement with your service provider. Let's first look at the newsgroups themselves.

The inhabitants of some newsgroups allow—or at least tolerate—personal or commercial advertising within their hallowed halls. A little common sense will tell you whether a newsgroup is the right place to post an ad of any type: **rec.music.marketplace** and **misc.forsale.computers.mac** (groups devoted to advertising) are certainly safer places to post than **rec.music.reviews** or **comp.sys.mac.comm** (groups devoted to discussion).

What you officially can and can't post depends on the "charter" (posted rules) of each newsgroup. However, what you can get away with on USENET and what your service provider allows may be two separate things.

I called your service provider and a spokesperson from their support staff said that service "does not allow its users to make posts that are against the charter of a newsgroup. Commercial postings are often specifically disallowed in the charter of newsgroups." (Notable exceptions are the biz news hierarchy, which is specifically for doing business, and the alt hierarchy, whose loosely knit groups are frequently without official charters.)

In the words of the support staff spokesperson, "in the case of the marketplace and for-sale groups, what is allowed and what isn't allowed can be a bit of a gray area. The fact that semi-commercial advertising is tolerated in these areas can mislead a user into thinking it's okay to advertise their business there. It isn't." So, a posting that says "I cleaned out my closet this weekend and found a lot of old compact discs. I'm selling the following titles for $10 apiece or best offer" would be just fine on **rec.music.marketplace**, but a posting that said, "BigNameBrands Discount Record House announces its Fall Clearance Sale! 10% off record-store prices! E-mail for a free catalog" would be a mistake.

The difference is that the former is a single unofficial personal sale by an individual. The latter is a business advertising its goods/services. (But even if you post an ad to a place where that's not kosher, the worst that can happen is you'll receive a few hundred flames from irked cohabitants of the Internet; you must ask what your goal is, what your company's image is, and whether flaming is necessarily a bad thing for your company!)

Your provider gets hundreds of complaints each day about the posts its users make. If a complaint is legitimate, the provider's policy is to ask the user to cancel the article—otherwise, the provider will temporarily suspend the account, a more drastic measure.

After three abuses, a user will probably never get his account back. By the way, my mole at your provider told me that many of the complaints they received are not about legitimate abuses, but merely someone trying to get an enemy in trouble!

Q Just how many businesses are selling their wares on the Internet? Is the practice of selling on the Net really growing as fast as everyone says?

A One way to measure commercial expansion on the Internet is to look at one key index. The latest edition of the Internet Mall, a listing of businesses advertising on the Net, lists 325 shops hawking their products and services online—everything from flowers to books to erotic toys.

The list is growing at the rate of two shops each day. To receive the Internet Mall, send e-mail to **taylor@netcom.com** with the words **send mall** in the Subject: line. Leave the message body blank.

[*Editor's note:* The Internet Mall, by the way, includes only companies whose "customers must be able to order through the Net directly," thus excluding the many companies not using online transactions. The moral of this story is that with 20,000-plus registered commercial domains, there is much more to the Net than hawking products and services; smart companies are quietly running their business using Internet e-mail, Web-based documentation, file transfer via FTP, conference calls via MUDs, and Internet-enabled customer service.] ◆

The Help Desk is a regular feature of the newsletter. Questions are answered by Kevin Savetz, a contributing editor to the* Guide *and author of* Your Internet Consultant *(SAMS, 1994). You can submit questions to David Peal, Editor, at: (202) 739-9541; or e-mail:* ***dpeal@ix.netcom.com.*

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